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Title: A framework for judging the 'quality' of first-person-action-research projects on the work based & integrative studies (WBIS) programme: Extracts from a practitioner research Masters dissertation

Date: 2008

Originally published in:

Example citation: Peach, J. (2008). *A framework for judging the 'quality' of first-person-action-research projects on the work based & integrative studies (WBIS) programme: Extracts from a practitioner research Masters dissertation.*

Version of item:

Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10034/206480>

A Framework for Judging the 'Quality' of First-Person-Action-Research Projects on the Work Based & Integrative Studies (WBIS) Programme

Extracts from a Practitioner Research Masters Dissertation

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How do we judge the quality of 'reflective research' projects? This paper presents extracts from a practitioner research project undertaken in 2007 which develops a framework to answer this question. The original contents page is presented at the end of this paper, for reference.

Introduction

An emerging and important challenge in my own Lecturing practice has become apparent over the last two years. An increasing number of students, including many students on high profile, corporate programmes, were adopting ***self-reflective research methods***, as part of the Research Methods and Research Project modules at Masters level. However, over time, I had begun to identify a number of issues that had started to develop, specifically related to FPAR practice. These included poor student experience and satisfaction, and varying Tutor expectations of work-based learning research methodologies. Within an organisational context encouraging

innovative practice, this was therefore an important strategic issue.

Although this type of research, termed first-person-action-research (FPAR), is an established method, with roots in sociology, the debate about FPAR 'quality' is only a recently emerging one. There are also no frameworks developed to guide FPAR quality, and the 'checklists' that do exist to guide FPAR dissertations are for Doctorate rather than Masters level. So there is little guidance to support the wider community of work-based learning Tutors wanting to support FPAR research. This research is therefore significant and timely, and aimed to answer three questions, in two stages:

- Stage 1: How is 'quality' in FP-AR defined and assessed? and How is 'quality' in FP-AR dissertations assessed?
- Stage 2: What characteristics do 'distinction' quality FPAR dissertations need to have (at Masters Level on the WBIS programme)?

A mixed method approach was adopted: stage 1 consisted of a content analysis of FPAR texts, followed by stage 2, the evaluation and validation of the framework by Tutors in my specific context. I argue that this was a highly efficient way to answer the research questions whilst offering external credibility. I also argue that being reflexive in the first stage of the research allowed the robustness of the research to be enhanced, first, by changing from a questionnaire to face-to-face, in-depth, interviews, and second, by expanding the definition of 'quality' to include validity and rigour.

The main outcome of stage 1 was a detailed framework with 5 categories and 34 sub-categories, which articulated characteristics of FPAR quality and FPAR dissertation quality. **It is argued that this is the first explication of such a framework, and therefore it has a theoretical contribution to the field of action research. In terms of practice, the**

community of FPAR practitioners beyond my workplace setting may also benefit from this, as they develop their own thinking and practice around FPAR quality and its impact only newly developing methodologies. It is also important to acknowledge that the framework will need to evolve over time, reflecting the current evolution in FPAR 'quality debates'.

The main outcome of stage 2, after amendments to the framework, was **validation of the framework.**

Although this was the more practical, localised outcome of the research, it is the **groundwork to further develop highly innovative practice** within my workplace, in terms of the implementation of FPAR activity. In particular, this stage of the research suggested that FPAR exemplars were developed and disseminated in line with the framework, that specific learning resources are developed, and that specific Tutor professional development activity is arranged. All of these are important to making a significant contribution to workplace practices within my workplace. It is also important to note that this framework may also be sufficiently transferable to support the development of FPAR in other work-based learning, Masters level, contexts, but this is a strand of future research other institutions or inquirers may want to develop.

Chapter 1 Problem Situation & Literature Review

The Literature: Quality in AR and AR Dissertations

Within this specific understanding of FPAR, there is an increasing literature on 'quality' in AR. It is, however, important to capture the differences between quality in AR, and the quality of AR dissertations (Zuber-Skerit and Fletcher, 2007), especially as the latter is subject to institutional reporting requirements. In this case, the requirements are the assessment criteria for the WBIS programme (see **Appendix 5**).

The discussion of quality in AR and AR dissertations is limited here, as I am suggesting that this is a key research question to be answered through the research.

So what is 'quality' in FPAR? Bradbury and Reason (2001) use concepts of **validity and rigour** in their discussion of quality in AR. This is largely supported in the literature (see Dick, 2002; Zuber-Skerit, 2007; Marshall and Reason, 2007). Bradbury and Reason (ibid) include issues such as: integrating diverse ways of knowing and methods; evaluating the work against its purpose; and achieving systematic, systemic change over time. Critically, their approach does focus heavily on reflection to empower others, or specifically, first person voices in *second-person practices*.

From an FPAR perspective (first-person voices, first-person practices), Marshall and Reason are currently leading the quality debate (Marshall, 2004; Reason, 2006; Marshall and

Reason, 2007). They argue that being systemic in *noticing* and *attention* are key factors, and that researchers should both 'tell' what happened and changed, and also 'show' the evidence of the change. However, Marshall and Reason (2007) acknowledge that these are 'developmental' ideas, rather than complete and thorough concepts of how to achieve 'quality' in FPAR. **To clarify what 'quality' is, and how to achieve it, is therefore be a key question of the research.**

In terms of the literature about the **quality of AR dissertations**, checklists are commonplace, such as Dick (2002), Zuber-Skerit (2002) and Zuber-Skerit and Fletcher (2007). Zuber-Skerit and Fletcher (ibid), for example, refer to indicators such as: methodology that is carefully designed, explained and justified; relevant use of literature (methodological and content); clear writing style, and so on.

However, a large proportion of the checklists are for Doctoral level theses, rather than Masters level dissertations. An example of how this impact the checklist is that in the Doctoral thesis, there needs to be an "original contribution that is well argued, demonstrated, documented and supported by evidence for every knowledge" (ibid). At Masters level, within the WBIS assessment criteria, "original insights" are required rather than major "original contributions" to a field. This must be clearly represented in the quality framework. **Therefore, to clarify how to write a 'quality' thesis at Masters level is another key question of the research.**

Chapter 2 Data Analysis: Stage 1 Developing Initial Quality Framework

FPAR Quality Framework, Version 1

At the end of the consolidation, it was clear that Spencer et al's broad categories did not have a clear link to their sub-categories. 'Reporting' and 'auditability' were important concepts, and linked some of the sub-categories together, but did not fully represent the group. A word was sought to represent the *ability of the inquirer and the dissertation to communicate* a number of important concepts within FPAR, which was a key concept in judging quality. The word '**communicability**' was chosen to better represent this group of categories.

It was very difficult to separate the other categories into Spencer et al's other broad categories. Part of the challenge was that they all related to Spencer et al's concept of 'Reflexivity & Neutrality'. This is not surprising, given that FPAR focuses heavily on reflexivity, and that Spencer et al's framework was to cover all qualitative methodologies.

The term 'neutrality' was removed, however, as it was perhaps less appropriate for FPAR methodologies, which are about capturing the biases of the individual, to then attempt 'transformation' of these – or 'critical subjectivity' (Reason, 2006). Neutrality is more aligned to seeking objectivity, which is more aligned to positivistic approaches and language (Marshall, 2004).

Two broad categories fell from the general 'reflexivity' category. First, **reflexivity around 'the self'**, which focus on the specific actions individuals can take to achieve reflexivity in terms of thinking processes. Second, **reflexivity around in the inquiry process**. This is broader, and relates to the wider choices that an inquirer can take. Therefore, three broad categories emerged from the consolidated categories, and are shown over the page. This demonstrates robust categories (or characteristics) of FPAR quality and FPAR reporting quality from the literature.

FPAR Quality Framework (integrating reporting)
REFLEXIVITY AROUND THE SELF
Prolonged engagement / immersion
Sharp attention-in-the-moment (purposes, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect)
Question own purposes, own assumptions and patterns, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect
Managed own emotions in context
Explore and critically justify ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical ways of knowing
REFLEXIVITY AROUND INQUIRY PROCESS
Cycles of action and reflection/data collection and analysis, emerging (from situation, people, data)
Participant framing (debriefing of rationale, approach and methods; grounded language and terminology)
Triangulate and explore diversity of perspectives, interpretations and voices
Disconfirming evidence and negative cases critically questioned and explored
Data and lines of inquiry saturated
Participant verification/validation
Analyses are positioned in, and sensitive to, an historical context
COMMUNICABILITY
Contributes to new awareness/knowledge (practical, theoretical or experiential) for individual and a wider community
Clearly positioned, epistemologically, with justification
Clear and detailed description and justification of the research rationale, approach and methods, in relation to the literature
Clear, logical and coherent storyline and structure
Sufficiently thick description of events/data (alive, raw, rich and multi-faceted but succinct)
Sufficiently thick description of the participants and the research context, to enable judgements about the transferability of this research to other contexts

Figure 1. Version 1 – Quality Framework

Chapter 3 Data Analysis: Stage 2 Application to, and Validation in, Context

The resultant framework is outlined below.

FPAR Quality Framework (integrating reporting + criteria) – Version 2/3
REFLEXIVITY AROUND THE SELF
Prolonged engagement / immersion
Sharp attention-in-the-moment (purposes, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect)
Question own purposes, own assumptions and patterns, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect
Managed own emotions in context
Explore and critically justify choice of focus of ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical
REFLEXIVITY AROUND INQUIRY PROCESS
Cycles of action and reflection/data collection and analysis, emerging (from situation, people, data)
Participant framing (debriefing of rationale, approach and methods; grounded language and terminology)
Triangulate and explore diversity of perspectives, interpretations and voices
Disconfirming evidence, negative cases, or confusions and self-contradictions are critically questioned and explored
Data and lines of inquiry saturated
Participant verification/validation
Analyses are positioned in, and sensitive to, an historical context
COMMUNICABILITY
Contributes to new awareness/insights/knowledge (practical, theoretical or experiential) for individual and a wider community
Clearly positioned, epistemologically, with justification
Clear and detailed description and justification of the research rationale, approach and methods, in relation to a breadth and depth of literature
Communicated in a lively, enthusiastic and engaging manner
Sophisticated evaluation of inquiry possibilities, and choices critically justified, in relation to a breadth and depth of literature
Sufficiently thick description of events/data (alive, raw, rich, multi-faceted and complex but succinct)
Sufficiently thick description of the participants and the research context, to enable judgements about the transferability of this research to other contexts
Persuasively clear, logical and coherent storyline and structure
Arguments, judgements and conclusions are cogent and well substantiated from the above, but limitations are acknowledged
Accurate spelling, grammar and academic referencing in the main report

Note: Highlighted rows/words indicate additions.

Figure 2. Version 2/3 – Integrating M Level Assessment Criteria

Chapter 4 Findings & Conclusions

A 'Final' Framework

The final, robust quality framework, with various reverse integrity checks, is outlined below. Additionally, the two main significant outcomes of the research were: **greater clarity** over what constituted quality in FPAR WBIS

work, and **agreement** over how such this sort of work should be judged. The implications of this framework, to my particular work setting, the wider FPAR community, and other higher education institutions are now outlined.

Characteristics of Distinction Quality 'First Person Action Research' WBIS Dissertations at Masters Level
REFLEXIVITY AROUND THE SELF
Strategies for sharp attention-in-the-moment (purposes, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect)
Question own purposes, own assumptions and patterns, strategies, behaviour and/or cause-effect
Critically analyse and justify focus on ways of knowing: experiential, presentational, and propositional, and where appropriate, practical
REFLEXIVITY AROUND INQUIRY PROCESS
Strategies for ethical research approaches
Cycles of action and reflection, and data collection and analysis (emerging from situation, people, data)
Triangulate and explore diversity of perspectives, interpretations and voices
Disconfirming evidence, negative cases, or confusions and self-contradictions, are critically questioned and explored
Analyses are positioned in, and sensitive to, a context (possibly including historical, political, economic, social, technological, ethical, legislative factors)
COMMUNICABILITY
Contributes to new awareness/insights/knowledge (practical, theoretical and experiential) for individual and a wider community
Persuasively clear, logical and coherent storyline and structure
Clearly positioned, epistemologically, with justification
Sophisticated, detailed evaluation of inquiry choices*, and decisions critically justified throughout, in relation to a breadth and depth of literature (*including broad choices: research rationale, approach and methods; and specific choices – see sections around <i>The Self and Inquiry Process</i>)
Sufficiently thick description of the participants and the research context, to enable judgements about the transferability of this research to other contexts
Thick description of significant events/data (alive, raw, rich, multi-faceted and complex but succinct)
Arguments, judgements and conclusions are cogent and well substantiated from the above, and limitations are acknowledged
Communicated in a lively, enthusiastic and engaging manner
Accurate spelling, grammar and academic referencing in the main report

Figure 3. Final Version – Integrating M Level Assessment Criteria

Conclusions

This research was a response to an increasing need for a guiding framework to help Tutors guide those students who want to adopt **self-reflection as a predominant method in a total methodology**, as part of the Research Methods and Research Project modules at Masters level within my workplace. Outlining the problem situation within my context, I highlighted that this type of research, termed first-person-action-research (FPAR) was increasing in use, and a number of issues had been raised, including poor student experience and varying Tutor expectations of quality. I also argued that there are no developed frameworks to guide FPAR quality, and that the checklists that do exist to guide FPAR dissertations are for Doctorate rather than Masters level. So as a community of work-based learning Tutors, wanting to support FPAR research, there was little guidance. This research was therefore timely, and aimed to answer three questions, across two stages:

- Stage 1: How is 'quality' in FP-AR defined and assessed?, and How is 'quality' in FP-AR dissertations assessed?
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A mixed method approach was adopted: stage 1 consisted of a content analysis of FPAR texts, followed by stage 2, the evaluation and validation of the framework by Tutors in my specific context. I argued that this was a highly efficient way to

answer the research questions whilst offering external credibility. Being reflexive in the first stage of the research allowed the robustness of the research to be enhanced, first, by changing from a questionnaire to face-to-face, in-depth, interviews, and second, by expanding the definition of 'quality' to include validity and rigour.

The main outcome of stage 1 was a detailed framework with 5 categories and 34 sub-categories, which articulated characteristics of FPAR quality, and FPAR dissertation quality. **It was argued that this is the first explication of such a framework, and therefore has a theoretical contribution to the field of action research. In terms of practice, the community of FPAR practitioners in other institutions may also benefit from this, in developing their own thinking around FPAR quality and hence new FPAR methodologies. It is also important to acknowledge that the framework will need to evolve over time, reflecting the current evolution in FPAR 'quality debates'.**

The main outcome of stage 2, after amendments to the framework, was **validation of the framework**. Although this was the more practical, localised outcome of the research, it is the **groundwork to further develop highly innovative practice** within my workplace, in terms of the implementation of FPAR activity. In particular, this stage of the research indicated that exemplars of FPAR needed to be developed and disseminated in line with the framework, that specific learning resources are developed, and that

specific Tutor professional development activity is arranged. All of these are important to making a significant contribution to workplace practices within my workplace. It is also important to note that this framework may also be sufficiently

transferable to support the development of FPAR in other work-based learning, Masters level, contexts, but this is a strand of future research other institutions or inquirers may want to develop.

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